

March 1978

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 14, no.1, March 1978, p.28-35

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The Sculptor of the Beautiful

by EBEN BASS

SEVERAL DETAILS, as well as the underlying theme, of Willa Cather's "The Sculptor's Funeral" suggest that this story is partially based upon Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful." As Mildred Bennet has shown, Cather's column "The Passing Show" for the Lincoln *Courier* contained an account of the burial of a Pittsburgh painter, Charles Stanley Reinhart, which deplored the prophet's lack of fame in his own country much as the later story was to satirize the non-recognition of Harvey Merrick in Sand City, Kansas.¹ But some elements of the story have nothing to do with the account of Reinhart, and they would appear instead to have been influenced by Hawthorne's tale. For example, both short stories relate their artist to a village, which Pittsburgh obviously was not. Cather describes only one of Merrick's works; it depicts a boy who has caught a butterfly, and a butterfly is the physical form which expresses Owen Warland's concept of the Beautiful in Hawthorne's story. Warland the artist and Danforth the blacksmith are rivals for the love of Annie in Hawthorne's tale, and Annie is the name of Harvey's mother, a frightful virago who dominates her husband and who tried to squelch her son's creativity. Most important, Cather's theme is close to Hawthorne's: the practical world has no use for ideal Beauty, which is appropriately pursued by only the Artist since only he can understand it.

Just as with Cather's story, the opposing traits of the ideal and the practical are carefully set forth in Hawthorne's tale in the characters of Owen Warland the Artist, who works in a watchmaker's shop, and Robert Danforth, who is a blacksmith. Their stance and gesture are revealing. While at work Owen is visible from the projecting window of his shop, enclosed behind glass, almost as if he himself were the fine mechanism of a watch. Robert can be seen through the open door of his shop, as if the open air, essential to the bellows of his forge, were also essential to his person. In Owen's shop window the watches have their faces turned away from the street, and Owen is seated sidelong, rather than looking out toward the world. The practical aspect of the watches (giving the time of day) is denied, in token of the self-contained mystery of Owen's skill. Robert, however, moves about in "this red glare and

1. Mildred R. Bennet, "Willa Cather in Pittsburgh," *Prairie Schooner*, I (Spring 1959), 64-76.

alternate dusk" from his forge, making no secret of his person or of his trade. Owen uses the "concentrated lustre of a shade lamp" to illuminate the "delicate mechanism" he works at, as if a peculiar, single-minded intensity were needed. Robert, however, works in "intervals of brightness" that are regulated "according as the breath of the bellows was puffed forth or again inhaled into its vast leathern lungs." As to what Owen labors at far into the night, half-joking rumor has it that he is making a perpetual motion machine. This he denies, but the rumor is in character with his fixed, obsessive role as an inventor or creator of the impossible. Robert's world is entirely that of the possible. In action, he is "enveloped in the myriads of sparks" caused by hammer strokes. He strikes sparks of life from the solid iron of reality. He is all noise and force, whereas Owen is silence and fine dexterity.

The skills of the young men are compared by Peter Hovenden, ex-watchmaker, master to Owen's former apprenticeship, and father to Annie, the prize to be given to the winner in this strange competition. Although Hovenden knows both worlds, he is partisan to one. He says that the province of the watchmaker is to work in gold, but that if he were given a second chance in life, he would prefer to work in iron, as Danforth does. Although Hovenden does not see all aspects of these worlds, he defines them by the classic opposition of dulce and utile. As a child, Owen declared his loyalty to the one and his hatred of the other. He would make "pretty shapes in wood" that were "always for purposes of grace." These small-scale, autonomous matters were at odds with large-scale practical affairs like the violent steam-engine that Owen feared and distrusted. It is apparent that Owen's real interest in the watchmaker's shop is the pursuit of Beauty, not the practical matter of watches that serve as timepieces. Yet it is the practical aspect that Hovenden seizes upon, and it is this skill into which he seeks to channel Owen's rare talent. In fact, this is the only use that the world can make of Owen.

According to the world, Owen is inept to serve as his own master. He had best be an apprentice and a useful time-server, which is Hovenden's definition of the trade of watchmaker. Yet even in this "useful" role, Owen sometimes fantasizes. He gets "creative" with serious timepieces and "trifles with time." He adds whimsical figures to grandfather clocks and makes a joke of the passing hours. For the practical world, time is a serious matter; serving or regulating it permits no frivolity or tricks of the imagination. Likewise, Owen mistakenly identifies Annie with his ideal "Beauty." As the tale proceeds, it becomes clear that she has a much more real and practical role—to be a wife and mother. In trying to explain that he is more than just an idler Owen says "My force . . . is altogether spiritual." What he is to spend his force upon is curiously depicted by the small anvil that Danforth makes for him at his request. The task strikes the blacksmith as an odd one, but he says that he is "equal to anything in

the way of my trade." When he presents Owen with a tiny model of his own anvil, Danforth is called a man of "main strength." It is then that Danforth teases his friend about the rumor of the perpetual motion machine, an invention which Owen denies as his objective. In the first place, he says that such a thing is impossible; and that furthermore, if it were ever made, it would only be misused for some practical end, such as "a new kind of cotton machine." After Robert's departure, Owen admits that "His hard, brute force darkens and confuses the spiritual element within me"—but he is still determined not to give in, even though Robert speaks for the force of the world.

The structure of Hawthorne's tale is neatly marked by three occasions when the delicate object Owen is making is destroyed. The first loss occurs immediately after Danforth visits Owen's shop. Owen despairs of matching his friend's brute force and then tries to recover himself by a resolve "to be strong in my own way." But he blunders at his work: "The vapor, the influence of that brute force . . . has bewildered me and obscured my perception." It is male brute force "that destroys the first exquisite mechanism." A second time, the mechanism will be destroyed by Annie's needle, and the third time, when it takes the form of an exquisite mechanical butterfly, it will be crushed in the hand of density, the child of Robert and Annie.

Owen's charge in the tale is to "keep his faith in himself while the incredulous world assails him with its utter disbelief." Yet for a time after his first failure he retreats to mere apprenticeship to Peter Hovenden. Owen finds himself "regulated, like clockwork, with leaden weights" and, his spiritual goal temporarily eclipsed, he "applied himself to business with dogged industry." The heaviness which is finally to emerge in another form as the child of Annie and Robert becomes "the heavy weight upon his spirits [that] kept everything in order." Peter Hovenden, praising Warland's industry, remarks that "Your success in life is sure as daylight." Owen pursues his true ideal, however, at night. Hovenden assumes a change of heart when he says that if Owen's solid industry continues, he will entrust his gold watch to Owen's repair. But the young man finds himself weighted down by Hovenden's presence. It is the distance of spirit and matter that stands between them. "Nothing so antipodal to his [Owen's] nature as this man's [Hovenden's] cold, unimaginative sagacity, by contact with which everything was converted into a dream except the densest matter of the physical world." Hovenden's grandson will be the epitome of this "dense matter."

Owen cannot survive upon matter. After a time, he begins another mechanism, but when Hovenden observes it he sees "witchcraft in these little chains, and wheels, and paddles." He offers to pinch it all out, between thumb and finger, as the grandson is to do with the butterfly. But Owen, with "wonderful energy," springs to the defense of his invention. Hovenden offers to "exorcise" Owen's "evil spirit," but Owen says

that the old man is his anathema. The "leaden thoughts, despondency" the master inflicts on him are Owen's "clogs." A rebellion ensues. Owen wastes the sunshine, Father Time goes unregulated, and the Artist's golden hours are spent observing butterflies and water insects. In his idleness Owen pursues his mission: like all creative artists, he seeks to give external reality to his idea of the Beautiful. In the metaphor of the tale, darkness is a time for creativity. Thus on cloudy days, Owen is seen musing, head in hand.

Owen clearly understands the difference between himself and Hoven-den. In his relationship with Annie, the issues are less clear to him. Because the two grew up together, he expects more understanding from her. In a memory that suggests Jim Burden's childhood friendship with Antonia, Annie says to Owen: "You are so taken up with the notion of putting spirit into machinery." Because of his (ill-founded) hope, Owen believes that Annie understands him "better than all the world besides." As an artist, he is "separated from the multitude by a peculiar lot," but the loneliness makes him long for a companion, whom he finds in his love for Annie. The young woman visits his shop with a simple request that should serve as a warning: "Will you mend this poor thimble of mine?" Just as the exercise of her needle put the thimble in need of repair, so it is Annie's needle that puts Owen's frail mechanism into motion, and destroys it. Owen experiences a "convulsion of intense rage" at her interference. If the needle is what her love requires, it is anathema to Owen's creativity. It destroys the second machine, just as the brute male force of Robert Danforth destroyed the first one. From this second incident Owen despairs at uniting love and art: "You lack the talisman, Annie, that should admit you into my secrets." The second accident is followed by Owen's second period of despondency: "When the ethereal portion of a man of genius is obscured, the earthly part assumes an influence the more uncontrollable."

Owen tries to escape from the second misfortune through the "golden medium of wine," whereas his escape after the first failure was through the leaden utility of watch repair. But again the spirit saves him from the escape. He is redeemed from the "perilous state" of wine by a "splendid butterfly," which inspires the third venture, one that exacts "unreasonable toil . . . under lamplight." "Owen is mad," is the account the townspeople give of his third pursuit of Beauty. The issues are more clearly drawn than ever. Peter Hovenden's understanding "disbelieved so uncompromisingly in what it could not see" and yet it "saw so distinctly what it did see."

Even after the engagement and marriage of Annie and Robert Danforth Owen still believes in his ideal. Yet this match will cause the third wreck of his efforts. Male brute force and woman's love unite (to recapitulate the first two failures) and produce a third, in the male child. Despite ill omens, Owen still sees Annie idealistically. "She, in the aspect which

she wore to his inward vision, was as much a creature of his own as the mysterious piece of mechanism would be were it ever realized." Owen believed her to be "the interpreter between strength and beauty." He wishfully thinks that her and Robert's child holds the answer: he is "a young child of strength . . . who had come mysteriously out of the infinite." In fact, though, the child is "sturdy and real" and "seemed moulded out of the densest substance which earth could supply." Furthermore, the child's look resembles Peter Hovenden's "habitual expression" of skepticism.

The final confrontation of the story, that of baby and butterfly, is again one of pleasure versus use. Owen has brought a wedding gift (somewhat after the fact!) to Annie. In announcing his success at creating the Beautiful, there is "triumph in his eyes and a smile of sunshine, yet steeped in such depth of thought that it was almost sadness." A boy and a butterfly decorate the ebony box that contains the mechanical butterfly, an emblem which typifies the pursuit of beauty, just as Cather's sculptor represents the pursuit of beauty by the boy holding the butterfly and trying to call his mother's attention to it. But the mother, as Harvey Merrick renders her, plies her needle in a way that suggests the single-mindedness of Annie's needle, and does not look at the butterfly. In Hawthorne's tale, the question is whether Annie's child will recognize the butterfly for what it represents, since the mother does not fully understand it. Hawthorne describes Owen's wonderfully made mechanism, "Nature's ideal butterfly was here realized in all its perfection." It is one of the sort "which hover across the meads of paradise for child-angels and the spirits of departed infants to disport themselves with." But how the other characters see the object is more important. Danforth thinks it is a common butterfly, one that is alive. That is, the materialist sees art in its proper function if and when it can substitute for life itself, *a la trompe d'oeil*. Annie, however, is not convinced of her husband's view. She recalls her childhood with Owen, and Owen's idea of "spiritualized machinery" is at the back of her mind. As it moves from finger to finger of various members of the family, the butterfly undergoes a series of changes. On the finger of Peter Hovenden it languishes, because he is a total skeptic. It alternately brightens and fades while perched on the grandchild's finger. It wishes to return to the hand of its maker, Owen, but he charges it to fly free to the others. The child then compresses the butterfly in his hand, as the final expression of Hovenden density. But Owen does not despair—he has caught "far other butterfly than this." The butterfly was only the mechanical contrivance to express his capture of Beauty, the outer show of his successful encounter.

Willa Cather's "The Sculptor's Funeral" is as confident in asserting the artist's success, although the story emphasizes, even more than Hawthorne's tale, the coldness of the village to artist and native son. Hawthorne's village tends to be allegorical; Cather's is a realistically and

satirically conceived place. Sand City's only connection with the outside world is kept with the train. Cather describes the vehicle almost as if it were the massive steam engine that shocked Hawthorne's Owen Warland as a child: "The night express shot, red as a rocket, from out the eastward marsh lands . . . the escaping steam hanging in gray masses . . . blotting out the Milky Way." The train is not on time, and although as an invention of the practical mind, it is expected to be a time-server, it bears the casket of the artist whose work defies time.

To recognize a second example of the shift from Hawthorne's allegory to Cather's satire is to observe the two characterizations of Annie. Hawthorne's figure is still a young mother and as such one of his many charming tributes to Sophia, combining as she did for him both the real and the ideal. In Cather's Mrs. Merrick, the name "Annie" is ironic: it refers to a tall, corpulent, ill-tempered woman with a diminutive form of the name that means "Grace" in Hebrew. Mr. Martin Merrick is "pained and embarrassed by his wife's orgy of grief," and he "continued to look at her with a dull, frightened, appealing expression, as a spaniel looks at the whip." Grace has become disgrace. This Anne is beside herself with rage because she can not bring her son to heel in the way she has done with her husband. Harvey escaped her in his pursuit of the butterfly, the ideal, and he dealt more kindly with her than she deserved by representing the mother in the small bas-relief as time-worn, but not merely time-serving. The expression on Harvey Merrick's face as he lies in the casket does not however show the repose expected in faces of the dead. He looks "as though he were still guarding something precious, which might even yet be wrested from him." Like Owen Warland, he has *caught* his butterfly, and he does not intend to disclaim it. Mr. Merrick's tribute to Harvey—"We didn't none of us ever onderstand him"—is in keeping with Owen's single-minded, lonely pursuit of the ideal.

The shift from Hawthorne's allegory to Cather's satire is also apparent in the symbolic objects of both stories. Jim Laird, once the friend of Harvey's youth, turns down the ugly glaring parlor lamp, with its jingling pendants, that hangs over Harvey's casket. Ugly, not ornamental, and yet aspiring to be an ornament, the lamp is the opposite of the single-purpose glare of Owen Warland's working lamp. Steavens, Harvey's young Boston friend and "apprentice," watches Laird turn down the lamp. "He could not help wondering what link there had been between the porcelain vessel [Harvey] and so sooty a lump of potter's clay [Jim Laird]." The difference between these one-time friends is much the same contrast that Hawthorne draws between Owen Warland as artist and Robert Danforth as blacksmith. But again, Cather's portrait of the man of clay is satirical, in fact the very persona of satire: an angry, red-bearded man who in a drunken mood disparages the whole town for its non-recognition of the ideal or the possibility of its successful pursuit as achieved by Harvey Merrick.

Much of the “voice” of “The Sculptor’s Funeral” is Jim Laird’s. Much of the thought behind that voice belongs to Steavens. He says that Merrick liked people, but “he always gave one the impression of being detached.” Merrick “distrusted men pretty thoroughly and women even more, yet somehow without believing them.” Owen Warland, too, does not depend much on people, and although he would like to expect more of Annie, he comes to his right senses when he doubts that she can really appreciate his objective as a creator of beauty. As Steavens reconstructs Merrick’s boyhood, he remarks, “If ever a man had the magic word in his finger tips, it was Merrick.” The tactile sense is entirely appropriate in a sculptor, but it is also notable in Owen Warland and his skill with tiny mechanisms. Also, sensitivity of touch is the whole point of the final scene in Hawthorne’s tale. Owen makes the butterfly travel from the fingers of one person in the family to those of the next, in a metaphorical test of touch to determine the awareness of each to beauty.

Other voices in “The Sculptor’s Funeral” are almost entirely unfriendly to the hero. When the Grand Army man says, “Harve never was much account for anything practical,” we have one side of the pleasure/use dichotomy so strongly stated in “The Artist of the Beautiful.” The Grand Army man also mocks Harvey’s “ladylike voice.” Owen Warland is also said to be slight in form and feminine of voice; he becomes aggressive and violent only when the “delicate mechanism” he creates is threatened. Further reversal of sexual roles is another manifestation of Cather’s satire. Harvey’s mother whipped him even when he was nearly full-grown for his absent-minded herding of cattle. She has long since reduced her husband to the state of a cowering dog, and no one dares stand up to her. Her sharp tongue is Annie Hovenden’s needle become a fatal destructive instrument. She is symptomatic of the reasons why most of the other sons of Sand City have turned out badly, including Jim Laird, who once shared dreams of the ideal with Harvey Merrick. Only Harvey brought home the palm leaf, just as Owen caught “far other butterfly than this.” The artist of either village escapes the narrow practicality of life, the common circumstances that trap most people.

Willa Cather’s column for the Lincoln *Courier* contained the germ for her story about the dead sculptor, but many of the details of the story are closer to Hawthorne than they are to the account of the Pittsburgh burial of Charles Stanley Reinhart.

Well, last summer they brought him home again, this man who had pursued Art’s fleeting shadow unto the ends of the earth, brought him home to artless Pittsburgh to keep his long watch beside the Allegheny. And no one knew or cared. The daily papers had a paragraph or two about him. A number of artists and literary men and several great editors came down from New York with his body, but his death was not even known in Pittsburgh.

“Reinhart dead? Oh yes; his brother is a fellow of some means I guess. Stanley never amounted to much.” I heard that a hundred times.²

2. Bennet, p. 71.

Mildred Bennet also records that during a summer vacation in Red Cloud Willa Cather heard of a local boy killed in a railroad accident to the east of town. Being a newspaper reporter, Cather went to the depot to meet the train that brought the boy's body home. Bystanders criticized him, saying he never amounted to much. That evening, Carther wrote "The Night Express," a poem which was published in 1903. The setting was used ten years later for "The Sculptor's Funeral."³ By that time, the steel mill fires of "artless Pittsburgh" must have recalled to Cather's mind the blacksmith's fire of Robert Danforth. In any case, Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful" provided a number of images and a theme for "The Sculptor's Funeral."

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3. Mildred R. Bennet, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln, Neb., 1961), p. 198.